“Who Belongs?”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On September 11th, 2016

**Focus scripture:** Luke 15:1-10

Today’s gospel reading from the book of Luke includes two of Jesus’ most famous parables: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. I will be focusing on the parable of the lost sheep.

The parables are notoriously difficult to understand, and open to various interpretations. And yet I like to preach on them, because these gems are probably the most authentically preserved teachings of Jesus that we have.

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament,

says that parables are “mysterious … [because] they challenge us to look into the hidden aspect of our own values, of our own lives”, saying that “we are better off thinking less about what they ‘mean’ and more about what they ‘do’ … remind, provoke, refine, confront, [and] disturb.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

I think the parable of the lost sheep reminds, provokes, refines and confronts what it means to *belong* … to belong to a church, to belong to a community, to belong to God and to one another. A sense of belonging is an important mark of spiritual health. To have no feeling of belonging is to be spiritually cut adrift.

So let’s prepare ourselves to be provoked, let’s dig into the parable.

First let’s look at the cast of characters in this passage. The first two groups of people do not appear in the stories. But they do provide a setting for Luke’s telling of the parables.

The first group we meet is the tax collectors and sinners who were *coming near* Jesus. They sound innocuous enough. Tax collectors may not be the most popular people, when tax day looms in April. Otherwise we can respect their roll in our community. The tax collectors of Jesus day were different. In the time of the Roman occupation of Palestine, tax collectors paid for the rights to extortion. Then they would force the ordinary folk in their domain to give them as much money as possible.

The tax collectors were wealthy, preying upon the poor, acting on the side of the oppressor. Think Whitey Bulger, or other mob bosses.

And the other sinners? Sinner isn’t a mild word in this context. These were the real outcasts of society. Some were powerful, like our drugs and arms dealers, insider traders, human traffickers or embezzlers. Others were victims, like those who have fallen prey to addiction, or like forced sex workers in our culture. The sinners mentioned here are not merely “nice” people who occasionally slip up. They are totally lost to the religious community. They do not belong.

The next group is the Pharisees and scribes. Despite the bad rap the Pharisees have been given through 2000 years of history, they were widely respected in the community. As devout religious leaders, they tithed, fasted and prayed. Their movement began the transition from temple worship, to devotion in the family home. Mainstream Judaism as we know it today grew out of this Pharisaic tradition.

Similarly the scribes were the ones who were knowledgeable in Jewish law, faithful in their study of scripture. In Jesus’ time the scribes and Pharisees were not the “bad guys”.

In Luke’s gospel, the Pharisees and scribes play a caricatured, one-dimensional role. They are the ones who watch Jesus closely, as he travels toward Jerusalem. They are the ones who want to keep order and prevent civil unrest turning into revolution. They see Jesus as one who is threatening that status quo, with his provocative teachings.

They get particularly upset when Jesus consorts with the ones they see as undesirable. They grumble and mutter because Jesus *welcomes* the ones at the margins: the sinners and tax collectors. The scribe’s and Pharisees have their *belonging* at the center of the religious community. It is in their interests to maintain things as they are.

Following these two groups, we meet actual characters in the parables that Jesus tells.

There is a shepherd who has a flock of 100 sheep. Perhaps this shepherd is careless - somehow one sheep has been lost. He is also not too savvy, economically speaking. Instead of cutting his losses and guarding the remaining 99, the shepherd sets out into the wilderness to find the lost sheep. He carries the wanderer home on his shoulders. The shepherd’s joy at finding the sheep is off-scale and contagious. He has restored his flock, it is whole once again. The lost sheep is back where it belongs.

He runs out to gather his friends and neighbors to celebrate. Which one of you, would do this? Jesus asks his audience, which is likely to include a few shepherds. “None” would be the answer. No shepherd would do this – it is pure foolishness.

Lastly, our cast also includes 100 sheep, plenty of parts for extras. One of these gets a special mention, while the others remain nameless, unremarkable.

Who are you in the drama?

Who would you like to be?

Would are *we the church* in the story?

And what does this say about our belonging?

For myself, honestly, the way I’ve heard it for many years: I’m the lost sheep, right? I’m the one I see in stained glass windows and children’s Bibles. The one I hear about in the old hymns. I’m the one Jesus comes seeking in the thicket, and gently lays me on his shoulders and comes home singing with joy at having found me. It’s a lovely, romantic image, and probably stops far short of what Jesus hoped this parable would convey.

I’m really not that special, and I haven’t ever been quite so lost. Sure, I have wondered, and strayed a little. But, honestly, nothing that would bring the good shepherd out on a cold winter’s night.

All my life I’ve been a rule-follower, I’ve always *belonged* to a church.

Yes, I have remained in the sheep fold, safe and secure. I *belong* in the fold, I have no doubt. If anything, I am one of the 99 sheep. There’s nothing very interesting for the 99 to do, other than to hang tight.

But, come to think about it, as one secure in their belonging and as a rule follower, I probably really should take my place with the scribes and Pharisees. There’s nothing inherently wrong with being a rule follower … so long as the rule is fair and just. But being preoccupied with rules can make someone … well, judgmental. And that fact hasn’t escaped me.

My care and compassion fly out of the window when I see someone abandon their cart in the supermarket parking lot Or when the driver in front of me in traffic tosses a cigarette butt out of the window. Being a rule follower can cause me to set up tight boundaries around my community of belonging. I don’t want these rule breakers invade my space, my place. This certainly puts me in line with the Pharisees and scribes as they stand by on the outside looking in, tut tutting while Jesus welcomes in the sinners.

There is one more remaining group, of course. There are the sinners. They’re not so pretty or romantic as a bleating lost sheep. Lost to the community, or driven out. Some have chosen to separate, to embrace practices that segregate them from the community. Others have been forced through circumstances.

Are these my cart abandoners and cigarette litterers? The ones who are too weary with life to care about consequences. The ones who would gladly be carried home, so long as they didn’t have to get up one more time and face the day alone.

Our shepherd God, our searching savior, is not willing to have them remain out in the cold. To be restored to belonging is a matter of inviting them in. All they need to do is allow the shepherd to haul them onto his shoulders, without too much of a struggle.

The Pharisees’ and scribes’ biggest worry, though, is that welcoming in the sinners will change things. And it is a real worry, because they will. And when things are changed, we lifetime church attenders will feel we belong a little less. When the sinners are welcomed home, the church community will be lighter and brighter. It will be joyous and celebratory. There will be no room for curmudgeonly grumbling. But Jesus isn’t going to leave us “lifers” out in the cold either. The choice is quite simple. Join in the celebration, come into the party … we all belong.

I’ve resisted, of course, being identified with the sinners. But the truth is we can generally find ourselves in every character in the parable. And even those of us who are lifetime church members have been lost and then found, one time or another.

Some have been found in dramatic ways, as in the parable. Step into an AA or other 12-step meeting to hear the powerful ways in which Jesus seeks out the lost.

Others have been found in small increments, not nearly so dramatic.

* Someone comes to check on us, when we’ve chosen to remain at home with the drapes closed.
* Someone brings a flowers or a casserole when we’ve had a loss and don’t seem to be able to get beyond it.
* Someone invites us back to church, to try one more time, when our noses have been put out of joint by something or another.

Perhaps, also, there is still some searching going on right now. God is searching out the parts of us we prefer to hide, the parts that keep us from being in the fold and *belonging* in the community completely. The parts of us that are still “in the hole”.

So rejoice, my friends of Wollaston Congregational Church, with our shepherd God. For God will come and find us out, and find out all of those who are lost to this beautiful gathered community. And when they are all carried home, and embraced, and fed at this table, *then* we will all *belong*. And there will be joy and singing in heaven and with the angels.

And we will all be together.

Amen!

1. Levine, Amy Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)